

The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Stanton at Lincoln's Deathbed

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

A Man for the Ages

BY EDWARD S. LEWIS

WHEN Abraham Lincoln died in the house opposite Ford's Theater, from the cowardly attack by the murderer Booth, Edwin M. Stanton approached the bed, closed Lincoln's eyes, and, drawing the sheet reverently over the dead man's head, uttered these words in a low voice: "He is a man for the ages."

In a conversation among editors in THE CLASSMATE office the other day, a story of the great President was recalled. He came to this city at one time to try a court case. It involved certain patent rights in a reaper, and there was four hundred thousand dollars at stake. His client had confidence in Lincoln, but when he found that his opponent had engaged the services of a brilliant array of eastern attorneys he called upon Edwin M. Stanton to help him out. It is true that Mr. Lincoln was rather rough in appearance and paid but little attention to his clothes. But he was utterly unprepared for the treatment that he received from the lordly Stanton. He had put in a good deal of time studying this case, which was the most important one that he had ever had, and he believed that he could win it. Naturally he was not indifferent to the effect that such a victory would have upon his growing reputation.

BUT Stanton could not see Lincoln at all. He took the case out of his hands, to all intents, and proceeded to handle it in his own way. He even indulged in some very unpleasant remarks about Lincoln. Both men were entertained in the Burnet House, and there Stanton cried out: "Where did that long-armed creature come from, and what can he expect to do in this case?" He spoke of him as "a long, lank creature from Illinois, wearing a dirty linen duster for a coat, on the back of which the perspiration had splashed wide stains that resembled the map of a continent."

It is easy to imagine the effect of this scorn upon the sensitive soul of Abraham Lincoln. It cut him to the heart. He was unknown in Cincinnati and without friends, and he was not only ignored in the great law case, but insulted by the gibes that he had

overheard through an open door in the hotel.

WHAT did he do? Nothing, in retaliation. He was so humble a man that he could forget himself, even in his bitter humiliation and disappointment. He generously admired the strange lawyers, and acknowledged that they were far superior to himself in legal knowledge and in the way in which they prepared their cases. They were highly educated men, and their training counted strongly for them. He saw another thing: that these able lawyers were working their way west, and would soon be competing with the lawyers in Illinois. So he said to himself, "I am going home to study law." This writer thinks that this marked the crisis in Lincoln's professional career, and that a great President was won for the United States in Cincinnati that day. When he assumed this high office in after years he invited Mr. Stanton, though a Democrat, to be Secretary of War in his cabinet.

Lincoln's visit to this city was far from being a total loss. He returned home, fired by an ambition that had never possessed him before: to know the law thoroughly and to become a master in its practice who would fear no opponents anywhere.

THE outstanding lesson of this is his humility. He would not fight, even when wronged, but acknowledged his own limitations and gladly changed his plans to overcome them. Herein was the greatness of this modern hero. Only as we recall this incident in his life can we fully estimate the significance of the impressive words spoken by the same Stanton as he closed the eyes of the illustrious martyr in death.

Jesus put humility first in the Beatitudes, also in his touching invitation to the heavy-laden to come to him and take his yoke upon them. This is the beginning of his religion, and its life as well. It conditions all prayer and praise and service. It strikes at the heart of selfishness and opens the way for all the other virtues. It wins hearts and disarms enemies and delights companions. "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted," said our Lord, and this word stands.

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STANTON AT LINCOLN'S BEDSIDE

The name of Edwin A. Stanton appears in the story of Abraham Lincoln's assassination more often than that of any other character except the assassin himself. The dispatches which Stanton sent from the bedside of Lincoln that fateful April night seventy-five years ago, brought to the people of the United States the most tragic news that the nation has ever read.

Notwithstanding the recent attempts to make it appear as if Stanton himself was the moving figure who instigated the assassination plot, the statement which he made at the hour of the President's death, that Lincoln belonged to the ages, will outlive any malevolent remarks about Lincoln's Secretary of War.

It would seem timely on this seventy-fifth anniversary of Lincoln's death to record the activities of Stanton from the time he learned of Lincoln's assassination, a short time after 10:30 on Friday night, April 14, until the President breathed his last at 7:22 A. M. on the following day—a period of approximately nine hours.

After Stanton reached his home that fateful Friday evening, he spent some time playing with his children in a back room of his residence. He was just preparing to retire when a messenger brought him the news of an attack on Secretary Seward. He immediately set out for the Secretary's home, and it was there that he first learned of Lincoln's assassination.

Secretary Welles states in his diary that he had just retired about 10:30 when a messenger, James Smith, came to the door and announced that the President had been shot and Secretary Seward and his son assassinated. Welles dressed and went immediately to Seward's home which was just across the square from his own residence. He found a large crowd of people assembled in front of the place, the lower hall and office were full of people, and there were already three physicians in attendance upon the injured men.

Welles made note that Stanton arrived at the Seward home "after but almost simultaneous with me." Following the visit to the rooms of Seward and his son, Welles and Stanton made immediate preparations to go to Lincoln. General Meigs, the military authority in charge at the Seward house, "begged Stanton not to go down to Tenth Street," and Welles also claimed that the remonstrators gathered around Stanton and, after he had placed his foot on the step of the carriage, detained him and pleaded with him not to go. Just as they were leaving Major Eckert rode up on horseback beside the carriage and protested vehemently against Stanton's going to Tenth Street, as he considered it "very unwise for the Secretary of War to expose himself." To all these entreaties Mr. Welles states that Stanton said he should certainly go.

It must have been approaching 11:00 when Stanton arrived at the Petersen home where the body of Lincoln had been taken. One of the first moves Stanton made after visiting the room where the President reposed was to send a message for Charles A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, to come to him immediately. Dana states that upon his arrival at the Petersen House all the members of the Cabinet and the Chief Justice were already there, and Stanton began immediately to dictate orders to him one after another. A paragraph from Dana's reminiscences gives one some idea of the load which fell on Stanton's shoulders. He states:

"Mr. Stanton alone was in full activity. . . . Then he began and dictated orders, one after another, which I wrote out and sent swiftly to the telegraph. All these orders were designed to keep the business of the Government in full motion until the crisis should be over. It seemed as if Mr. Stanton thought of everything, and there was a great deal to be thought of that night. The extent of the con-

spiracy was, of course, unknown, and the horrible beginning which had been made naturally led us to suspect the worst. The safety of Washington must be looked after. Commanders all over the country had to be ordered to take extra precautions. The people must be notified of the tragedy. The assassins must be captured. The coolness and clearheadedness of Mr. Stanton under these circumstances were most remarkable."

One of Stanton's biographers, Frank Flower, gives in further detail some of the tasks which involved upon Stanton during those early morning hours:

"He sent for several army officers to act as aides; directed General Thomas M. Vincent (assistant adjutant-general) to take charge of affairs in the Petersen building; telegraphed to General Grant at Philadelphia that Lincoln had been shot and to return at once to Washington; issued orders, oral and written, to the police and military authorities of the District to be prepared for emergencies; telegraphed to Chief Kennedy of New York to send on his best detectives immediately; ordered General L. C. Baker to return from New York to search for the assassins."

But Dana was not the only scribe whom Stanton was keeping busy during those exciting hours. James Tanner, employed as a stenographer at the Capitol, was immediately summoned by General Augur. Chief Justice Carter of the Supreme Court of the district had come to the Petersen house with Stanton from the Seward home, and had already set up a court of inquiry when young Tanner arrived. This is Tanner's story of the proceedings:

"General Augur conducted me into the rear parlor, where I found Secretary Stanton sitting at one side of the small library table and Chief Justice Carter of the supreme court of the District at the end. They had started in to take what testimony they could regarding the assassination, having someone write it out in longhand. This had proved unsatisfactory. I took a seat opposite the secretary and commenced to take down the testimony. . . . We had Harry Hawk, who had been on the stage, Laura Keane, and various others before us. No one said positively that the assassin was John Wilkes Booth, but all thought it was he.

"Many distinguished people came in during the night. Our work was often interrupted by reports coming in to Secretary Stanton and more often interrupted by him when he halted the testimony to give orders. Through all that awful night Stanton was the one man of steel.

"I finished transcribing my notes at 6:45 A. M. and then passed back to the room in the L where the President was dying.

"I repeat, Stanton had been steel all through the night, but as I looked at his face across the corner of the bed and saw the twitching of the muscles I knew it was only by a powerful effort that he restrained himself and that he was near a break."

John Hay, personal secretary of Abraham Lincoln, wrote a letter to Stanton on July 26, 1865, which is now preserved in the Library of Congress. It is irrefutable testimony of the esteem in which the President held Edwin A. Stanton, his Secretary of War, who carried on at the bedside of his chief to the last hour. An excerpt from the letter follows:

"If any human names are to have the glory of this victory, it belongs to you among the very few who stood by the side of him who has gone to his better reward, and never faltered in your trust in God and the people.

"Not every one knows as I do how close you stood to our lost leader, how he loved you and trusted you, and how vain were all the efforts to shake that trust and confidence not lightly given and never withdrawn, and this will be known sometime of course to his honor and yours."

#1 Book Sense Pick



**“PROFOUNDLY
ENLIGHTENING
AND UTTERLY
ENJOYABLE.”**

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playwright, *M. Butterfly*



**“FREE FOOD FOR
MILLIONAIRES
is the best novel I’ve read
in a long time.”**

—Elisabeth Egan, *Self*,
Contributing Books Editor



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ANNALS OF BIOGRAPHY

ANGELS AND AGES

Lincoln’s language and its legacy.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

This all began on a very long plane ride, East Coast to West, when I was reading Doris Kearns Goodwin’s “Team of Rivals,” her book about Abraham Lincoln and his political competitors, and how, in the course of the Civil War, he turned them into a collegial Cabinet. It is a well-told, many-sided story, which attempts to give context to Lincoln without diminishing him, to place him among his peers and place him above them, too.

Coming to the end of the book, to the night of April 14, 1865, and Lincoln’s assassination, I reached the words that were once engraved in every American mind. At 7:22 A.M., as Lincoln drew his last breath, all the worthies who had crowded into a little back bedroom in a boarding house across the street from Ford’s Theatre turned to Edwin Stanton, Lincoln’s formidable Secretary of War, for a final word. Stanton is the one with the long comic beard and the spinner’s spectacles, who in the photographs looks a bit like Mr. Pickwick but was actually the iron man in the Cabinet, and who, after a difficult beginning, had come to revere Lincoln as a man and a writer and a politician—had even played something like watchful Horatio to his tragic Hamlet. Stanton stood still, sobbing, and then said, simply, “Now he belongs to the ages.”

It’s probably the most famous epitaph in American biography, and still perhaps the best; reading the words again, I felt a shiver. They seem perfectly chosen, in their bare and stoical evocation of a Lincoln who belongs to history alone, their invocation not of an assumption to an afterlife but of a long reign in the corridors of time, a man now part of eternity.

Overcome again by Lincoln’s example—by the idea of a President who was at once an interesting mind, a tough customer, and a good writer—I decided to start reading the new Lincoln literature. It seemed to be multiplying by fission, as amoebas do, on the airport bookstore

shelves. For the flight home, I picked up James L. Swanson’s “Manhunt,” a vivid account of the assassination and the twelve-day search for John Wilkes Booth that followed. Once again, I came to the deathbed scene, the vigil, the gathering. The Reverend Dr. Gurley, the Lincoln family minister, said, “Let us pray.” He summoned up . . . a stirring prayer. . . . Gurley finished and everyone murmured ‘Amen.’ Then, no one dared to speak. Again Stanton broke the silence. ‘Now he belongs to the angels.’”

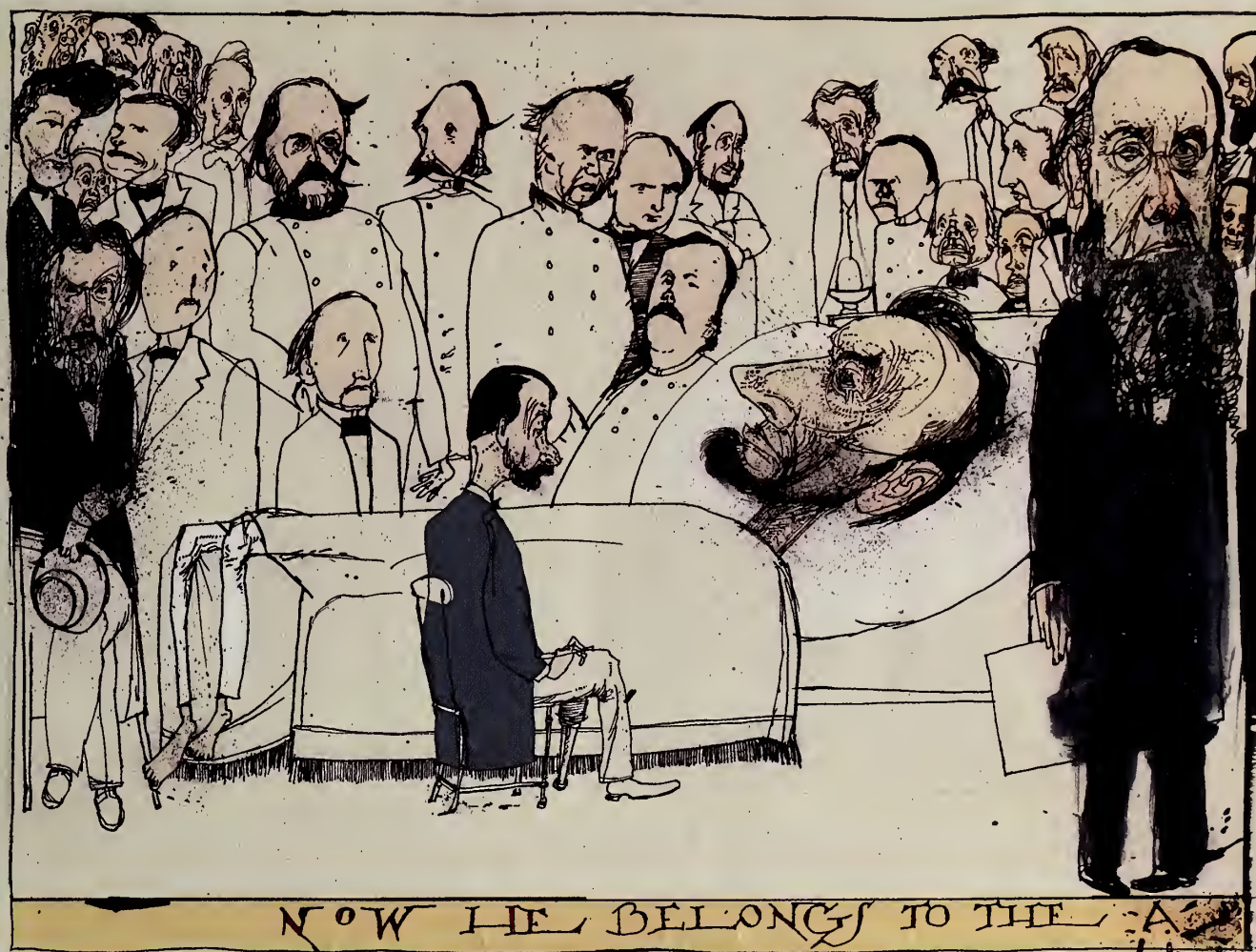
Now he belongs to the angels? Where had *that* come from? There was a Monty Python element here (“What was that? I think it was ‘Blessed are the cheesemakers,’” the annoyed listeners too far from the Mount say to each other in “Life of Brian”), but was there something more going on? I flipped to the back of the book. In the endnotes, Swanson explained that his rendering was deliberately at variance with the scholarly consensus: “In my view, shared by Jay Winik, the most persuasive interpretation supports ‘angels’ and is also more consistent with Stanton’s character and faith.”

Well, that seemed circumspect enough. Even without having read Jay Winik, though, one could glimpse, just visible beneath the diaphanous middle of that endnote, the tracings of an ideological difference. Unlike Goodwin, a famous liberal, Swanson is a conservative legal scholar at the Heritage Foundation. And Stanton’s words as they are normally quoted are (like the Lincoln Memorial) a form of American neoclassicism, at odds with the figure of Christian nobility prized by the right: Lincoln’s afterlife lies not in Heaven but in his vindication by history. Does he belong to the angels or the ages? This small implicit dispute echoed, in turn, a genuine historical debate: between those historians who insist on a tough Lincoln, the Lincoln whom Edmund Wilson, in “Patriotic Gore,” saw as an essentially Bismarckian figure—a cold-blooded nationalist who

guaranteed the unity of the North American nation, a stoic emperor in a stovepipe hat whose essential drive was for power, his own and his country's—and those who, like Goodwin, see a tender, soulful Lincoln, a figure of almost saintly probity and patience who ended slavery, deepened in faith as the war went on, and fought hard without once succumbing to hatred. A

just outside Washington, where he spent summers throughout the war). You can read a book about Lincoln's alleged love affair with a young officer, and one about Lincoln's relations, tetchy but finally triumphant, with Frederick Douglass. There is no part of Lincoln, from manhood to death, that is not open and inscribed. You can learn that some of Lincoln's intimates

coln or someone in his circle, and what people thought had been said. Even with the Gettysburg Address, despite our possession of what seem to be two drafts and what are certainly several later copies in Lincoln's own hand, there are many arguments about exactly what Lincoln said. Gabor Boritt, in his book "The Gettysburg Gospel," has a thirty-page appendix



What did Edwin Stanton actually say at Lincoln's deathbed? Language has become a central subject in Lincoln studies.

Lincoln for the ages and a Lincoln for the angels already existed. Now the two seemed to be at war for his epitaph.

When I got back to New York, I called Harold Holzer, an old friend, whom I had known as a spokesman for the Metropolitan Museum of Art but who is also one of the country's leading independent Lincoln scholars. He suggested a longer reading list of the recent Lincoln literature, and I made my way through as much as I could. There's a lot to read. In books published in the past two years alone, you can read about Lincoln's "sword" (his writing) and about his "sanctuary" (the Soldiers' Home

believed his melancholy was rooted in extreme constipation ("He had no natural evacuation of bowels," a friend explained) and also what formula was used to embalm him, a gruesome but far from trivial point. (The formula, which gave the body the appearance of marble, was being used to keep intact the bodies of the boys whose corpses had to be shipped home to their families during the war.)

It emerged that there had long been debates, natural in an age before mechanical recording, over what had actually been said at any given moment by Lin-

that compares what Lincoln (probably) read at the memorial with what people heard and reported. Most of the differences are small, and due to understandable confusions—"The world will little note nor long remember what we say here" became in some reports "The world will little heed what we say here"—or to impatience on the part of a reporter. (The *Centralia Sentinel*, of Lincoln's home state, wanting nothing to do with fancy talk, had the speech begin, simply, "Ninety years ago . . .")

A few disputes seem more significant. The Cincinnati *Daily Gazette*, a Repub-

lican paper, made the famous first sentence end "that all mankind are created free and equal by a good God," though it's hard to know whether its reporter had deliberately italicized the point or was simply hearing it with his heart. Also in the first sentence, Lincoln's remark that the nation was "conceived in liberty" was reported in some newspapers as "consecrated to liberty," a more religious reading of the intended message, and there are those who believe that Lincoln made an impromptu alteration. Many reporters heard Lincoln say, "This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom," though the phrase "under God" occurs in neither draft of the text; Lincoln may have spontaneously inserted it—a sign of his growing religious consciousness during the last year of the war. In "Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words," Douglas L. Wilson worries his way through the possibility, preserved in one of the drafts, that Lincoln referred not to "government of the people, by the people," etc., but to "this government of the people, by the people," etc., deliberately circumscribing the meaning.

It is not hard to see, in this exegetical exactitude, something that recalls the attention that scholars give to fine-point disputes about the words and tales of Jesus and his apostles. This attention to verbal minutiae extends to the secondary figures in the Lincoln gospel, not least his assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Booth ei-

ther did or did not say just as, right before, or shortly after he murdered the President, "*Sic semper tyrannis*," the motto on the state flag of Virginia. Possibly, he cried "The South is avenged!" or "Revenge for the South," and he cried this in the box, or on the stage, or paired with another cry. Of the forty or so reliable witnesses to the assassination whose accounts are collected in Timothy S. Good's "We Saw Lincoln Shot," some sixteen heard the Latin or the English, only four heard both, and many say that they didn't hear the assassin say anything at all. Two witnesses heard Booth say, "I have done it!" Well, which was it? It is possible that he said only *Sic semper tyrannis*, onstage or off, and that the words were easily misheard by a stunned audience: "The South is avenged." On the other hand, he may have cried out both, and then added the gloating remark as he fled. But then why didn't more people hear him?

Booth himself, for whom the assassination was, Swanson says, a kind of diabolical work of performance art, insisted on the "right" reading. "I shouted *Sic semper* before I fired," he wrote a few days later, in his own note, which he intended to be sent to the newspapers. One of the more pathetic-horrific aspects of the assassination was how desperate Booth was to read his notices in the next day's papers. Having tailored his performance to what he believed would be a shrewd public appeal—even Northerners would

have doubts about Lincoln's absolutist claims to power—he was shocked to find that he had canonized a saint and been cast as a villain. (One of the odd things in American history is that we are inclined to "psychologize" acts of assassination that, whatever dark corner of the psyche they are torn from, are clearly and explicitly political in motive. Oswald shot Kennedy in an act of terrorism on behalf of Castro; Sirhan Sirhan killed Bobby Kennedy because he believed him to be pro-Israel; Booth killed Lincoln because Booth was a violent racist who thought that Lincoln would enfranchise blacks, and that if he was dead this would be less likely to happen—as, indeed, it turned out to be.)

The tendency to obsess over single words and phrases reflects, in part, the semi-divine status of Lincoln in American history. But it also reflects a desire to show that rhetoric and writing were as essential to his career as acts and orders and elections. In the past twenty-five years, and particularly since the publication of Garry Wills's "Lincoln at Gettysburg" (1992), language and its uses has become a central Lincoln subject. Two prominent strains of rhetoric run through the period—the Biblical and the classical—and political ideas tend to get tinted by whichever of them the speaker uses. Reading Edward Everett's Gettysburg address, the two-hour set speech that preceded Lincoln's and was meant to be the real event of the Gettysburg commemoration, one is startled to see how relentlessly classical it is in tone and analogy: Everett goes on and on about Marathon and the Greeks and the Persian invasions, in order to "elevate" Gettysburg and the Union soldiers. Lincoln's rhetoric is, instead, deliberately Biblical. (It is difficult to find a single obviously classical reference in all of his speeches.) Lincoln had mastered the sound of the King James Bible so completely that he could recast abstract issues of constitutional law in Biblical terms, making the proposition that Texas and New Hampshire should be forever bound by a single post office sound like something right out of Genesis.

What strikes a newcomer to Lincoln's speeches, however, is how rare those famous cadences are; their simple, resonant language—"with malice towards none, with charity for all"; the concluding and opening lines of the Gettysburg Ad-



"I'm not hopping mad, just hopping disappointed."

dress—is memorable in part because there isn't much of it. The majority of Lincoln's public utterances are narrowly, sometimes brilliantly, lawyerly—even, on occasion, crafted to give an appearance of inevitability to oratorical conclusions that are not well supported by the chain of reasoning that precedes them. The undramatic, small-print language in which Lincoln offered the Emancipation Proclamation is the most famous instance of his mastery of anti-heroic rhetoric. (Karl Marx said that it reminded him of "ordinary summonses sent by one lawyer to another.")

But Lincoln believed in legalism. One of his first public speeches, the Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum, in Springfield in 1837, declared a radical insistence on "reason" to be the only acceptable form of public discourse; the cure for the prevalence and epidemic of violence in American life would be "hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason": "Passion has helped us, but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason—cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason—must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence." Lincoln tempered but never really abandoned that conviction. His rhetorical genius lay in making closely reasoned argument ring with the sound of religious necessity.

There is, in consequence, often a subtle disjunction between Lincoln's content and his codas, as James Oakes puts it in his fine new account of Lincoln's friendship with Frederick Douglass, "The Radical and the Republican." The first two-thirds of the speech that Lincoln delivered at Cooper Union, in New York, in February of 1860, and that is generally thought to have made him President—it turned him from a local to a national figure—is devoted to a maniacally detailed inspection of how twenty-three of the "thirty-nine," the signers of the Constitution of 1789, voted during their careers on the issue of federal regulation of slavery. Lincoln had tabulated the results with all the dramatic flair of an insurance adjuster: his point is that the framers and signers, when in the Senate and the House, voted regularly to extend and prohibit slavery, thereby giving at least a passive endorsement to the view that the Constitution allowed the federal government to legislate about it in all its parts.

Yet the argument is carried on in numbing and what might seem to be ir-

relevant detail: after all, slavery wouldn't suddenly become noble if the framers *had* reserved its governance for the states. Yet by making it plain that this *is* an argument, an appeal not to sentiment but to constitutional law, Lincoln places his own unqualified anti-slavery sentiment on the same dryly legal and procedural grounds that he had recommended at the Lyceum. The result is the same, as he knew perfectly well. That's why the final cry of the Cooper Union speech is so suddenly uncompromising and even frankly warlike: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

In an acerbic, disabused, but ultimately convincing book, "Lincoln the Lawyer," the historian Brian Dirck argues that Lincoln took away from the practice of law and the love of legal language both a feeling for "grease"—that is, for finding an acceptable middle ground between contending parties—and a habit of detachment. In the old hagiography, Lincoln the lawyer was a fiery, folksy fighter against injustice; to more recent, disillusioned revisionists, he was a corporate lawyer, a "railroad" lawyer doing the work of the new industrialists. Dirck shows that both accounts are overdrawn. (Lincoln did do some work for the railroads, but it was relatively rare and relatively minor.) The bulk of his legal work—which took up the bulk of his professional life—was the predictable work of a small-town lawyer with a wide practice: property disputes, petty criminal cases, family arguments over money, neighbor at war with neighbor, bankruptcies, and, oddly, libel suits where local women defended themselves against charges of prostitution. His practice was the legal equivalent of a small-town doctor's, treating head colds, lice, scarlet fever, and a rare case or two of venereal disease.

What he learned was not faith in a constant search for justice but the habit of empathetic detachment. When we look closely, Dirck says, "we can see Lincoln the President trying hard to apply a lawyer's grease to the shrill machinery of war." Dirck insists that Lincoln's magnanimity, which was real, should not be "sentimentalized as a form of kindness. . . . His magnanimity was also a function of his lawyerly sense of distance from other people's motives, and his appreciation—honed by decades of witnessing nearly

every imaginable form of strife in Illinois's courtrooms—of the value of reducing friction as much as possible." The lack of vindictiveness that Lincoln displayed (his favorite expression, his secretary John Hay once explained, was "I am in favor of short statutes of limitations in politics") was the daily requirement of a small-town lawyer. Lincoln believed in letting go; his magnanimity was more strategic than angelic.

But what did Edwin Stanton really say at Lincoln's deathbed? Swanson's endnotes lead one to Jay Winik's endnotes in *his* book on the end of the Civil War, "April 1865." I called Winik, an author and historian, and he said, a little ruefully, that his insertion of "angels" into the text had been "the element most open to misinterpretation" in his ambitious and far-ranging volume. His endnote leads one, eventually, to "Twenty Days," by Dorothy and Philip Kunhardt, Jr., a well-made book of photographs from the eighteen-sixties, which in turn leads the reader directly to the ur-source of the angels. The unorthodox, heretical account of Stanton's words is actually much easier to "source" than the canonic and orthodox and familiar one: it comes from a stenographic record made in the bedroom that night by a young man named James Tanner.

Tanner was a corporal who had had both legs amputated after the Second Battle of Bull Run—he walked on peg legs—and lived in the house next door to the boarding house, Petersen's, where Lincoln was taken. Sometime that night, as Stanton was beginning to interrogate witnesses to the shooting, one of his generals appeared on the steps of the Petersen house and called out for someone who could write shorthand. Tanner heard him, and hobbled down to take dictation. He spent the rest of the night beside the dying President.

The scene in the famous "rubber room," as Holzer has called it—in the endless prints and other popular images, the walls of the room expand constantly outward, pressed by the number of dignitaries who had to be included—was uglier than even the more faithful imagery shows. Lincoln's head wound was bleeding throughout the night, and the doctors had to remember to cover up the blood with fresh towels when Mrs. Lincoln, fallen into a grief from which she never re-

ally recovered, wandered in. Lincoln was laid diagonally across the too short bed, knees up, and naked underneath the mustard plasters that had been placed on his chest.

Stanton took charge, dictating messages and taking evidence, with Tanner pressed into service as his secretary. At last, at seven-twenty-two in the morning, Tanner writes:

The Reverend Dr. Gurley stepped forward and lifting his hands began "Our Father and our God" and I snatched pencil and notebook from my pocket, but my haste defeated my purpose. My pencil point (I had but one) caught in my coat and broke, and the world lost the prayer, a prayer that was only interrupted by the sobs of Stanton as he buried his face in the bedclothes. As "Thy will be done, Amen" in subdued and tremulous tones floated through the little chamber, Mr. Stanton raised his head, the tears streaming down his face. A more agonized expression I never saw on a human countenance as he sobbed out the words: "He belongs to the angels now."

Note, though, that while Tanner presumably heard all this, he didn't actually claim (as is sometimes implied in the pro-angels literature) to have recorded it in situ, what with the broken pencil. Still, his account, the ur-source of the "angels" quote, sounds fairly solid.

What would those angels have summoned forth to the "Lincoln men" standing by his deathbed? The imagery of "angels" seems to have entered Lincoln's own rhetoric for the first time when he was revising Secretary of State William Seward's proposals for his first Inaugural. Seward had, with what must have been maddening condescension, slipped the new President a letter detailing what he ought to say to the country. It included a vague, conventional reference to the "guardian angel" of the nation. Lincoln seized on that reference and turned it into one of his most memorable rhetorical inventions, the "better angels of our nature," which might yet keep the country from war. The force of the rhetoric is such that its meaning can still be a bit obscure: North and South would not go to war, Lincoln was arguing, because of their common sense of a shared past. Lincoln's own angels already belong to history, to the ages.

The question of Lincoln and the angels leads to the most vexed question in all the Lincoln literature, that of his faith. How religious—how willing to credit more than metaphoric angels—did the men in the room think that Lincoln was?

It is vexed because the evidence points to two truths, difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, Lincoln was all his life—aggressively in his youth, more mildly in his age—anti-clerical and anti-dogmatic, not any kind of churchgoing Christian but a profound and declared skeptic. In his first campaign for Congress, he admitted that he was not a member of any church and that "in early life" he had argued for the "Doctrine of Necessity"—that is, a belief in man as a mere pawn of universal law, without free will. Both Mary Lincoln and his Springfield law partner William Herndon (also his first biographer) were unequivocal about his rejection of any standard churchgoing faith, and the various posthumous claims that he "converted" to some form of Christianity have been mostly exploded.

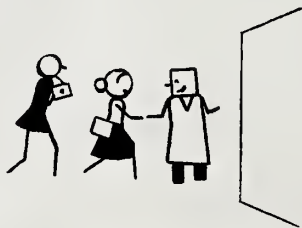
Yet, undeniably, as the war and his Presidency progressed, Lincoln spoke increasingly of God—inserted God, as it seems, into the Gettysburg Address—and evidently had some kind of complicated and rich sense of "necessity" and a supernatural presiding power. The second Inaugural is the most famous instance, with its insistence that "if God wills that [the war] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

This is a darker vision of Providence, and of God, than is quite compatible with any kind of ordinary Protestantism. In a review of James Takach's "Lincoln's Moral Vision," Lucas E. Morel writes, "Lincoln's perplexing piety comprised a fiercely independent admixture of Enlightenment rationalism and Calvinist fatalism." His faith was rooted mainly in a kind of mystical inner sense of predestination, not so far from that youthful doctrine of necessity. He found no serenity in the idea that he was doing God's

work. His point in the second Inaugural is not that he is doing God's will but that God's will is going to be done, no matter what Lincoln does. He thought not that God was on his side or the other but that God had determined on this conflict, perhaps as a collective punishment for the sin of slavery, perhaps for reasons permanently mysterious to men. He came increasingly to believe in Providence, but it was a Providence that acted mercilessly through History, not one that regularly interceded with compassion. That was left to men, and Presidents.

The one place in America where you can get a sense of Lincoln the President at work and at play is the Soldiers' Home, on the outskirts of Washington, about three miles from the White House. After the death of his son Willie, in 1862, Lincoln used a cottage on the grounds as a kind of retreat, a proto-Camp David, and spent summers there from 1862 to 1864. Every other place associated with him either predates the Presidential years or has changed so much that it is unrecognizable. But Lincoln's cottage, which has been largely neglected, still resonates with the period. It was an odd location for him; though it was cooler than central Washington in the summer, it was also a soldiers' retirement home, with a cemetery just alongside, where the Union dead were sent to be buried.

Lincoln loved the Soldiers' Home, preferring it to the stolid White House. Walking through the buildings, one sees that the rooms have a nineteenth-century spaciousness and ease; and one is reminded that, as the British biographer Richard Carwardine points out, the young Lincoln was avid as much for bourgeois respectability as for riches, or even for fame. It was in these bright but cozy rooms, too, and out on the surrounding lawns, that he and Stanton really took the measure of each other. The story of Stanton and Lincoln—the reason that, at the very last moment, the assemblage deferred to Stanton to say the final words—is well retold by Doris Kearns Goodwin and, in particular detail, by William Lee Miller. In the eighteen-fifties, Stanton was a prominent litigator, and in 1855 he and Lincoln were thrown together in a complicated patent litigation with an Illinois angle. Lincoln felt that here at last



was his opportunity to break into big-time law. He prepared maniacally, only to find himself, at the trial in Cincinnati, shuffled off by the senior Stanton and prevented not only from arguing but even from consulting with the senior lawyers. Lincoln didn't hold the incident against Stanton, a Democrat whose contempt for him even after he was nominated for President was almost open, and made him Secretary of War after his first choice, Simon Cameron, got caught up in a scandal.

At the Soldiers' Home, Lincoln and Stanton became friends. They shared a common tragedy—both had lost a son in the course of the war—and a common nature: outwardly remote, inwardly passionate. (When Stanton's young wife died, he insisted on having a wedding dress made for her to be buried in, and for months he wandered through their house, half mad, crying out for his bride.) Stanton, too, had a cottage at the Soldiers' Home, and spent summers there with Lincoln. Most people intensely disliked Stanton; one Cabinet secretary called him "rude and offensive." But at the Soldiers' Home, as Matthew Pinsker shows in his book "Lincoln's Sanctuary," another side of his nature became apparent: he played mumblety-peg with a soldier and, on one memorable occasion, spent an evening with Lincoln untangling peacocks. (Small blocks of wood had been tied to the birds' feet with strings to keep them from flying away, but the lines got snarled in the trees.) As Stanton came to know Lincoln, he formed an opinion of his intellect so high that he said to one of his fellow-lawyers, "No men were ever so deceived as we at Cincinnati." It was a friendship deep enough, and famous enough, to make everyone in Lincoln's last room wait for Stanton to speak.

Though it is easy to track the exact source of the revisionist "angels," it is much harder to find the source of those "ages." Like many famous scenes and remarks, it enters memory through a window while no one is looking. When, in 1890, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Lincoln's two secretaries, wrote what was to be for almost a century the standard life of Lincoln (whom they called the Tycoon, seeing him as a politician of limitless shrewdness rather than as a saint of infinite



"Sorry—that's the screen saver."

patience), the entire atmosphere of the death scene had changed and, with it, the words. Their Stanton coolly breaks the silence of death and pronounces his benediction: "Now he belongs to the ages." Hay was certainly in the room, near the deathbed, and knew the people involved far better than Tanner could have, and his account is crisp and definitive-sounding.

But where before then had it been registered? The trail of footnotes leads one eventually to the most thorough account of how Stanton's words entered the American memory, and it occurs, bizarrely, in Otto Eisenschiml's 1937 book "Why Was Lincoln Murdered?"—bizarre because Eisenschiml, whose book was a best-seller in its day, was a conspiracy theorist who believed that Stanton had conspired to have Lincoln assassinated. (His motive was supposedly to gain a harder peace for the South than Lincoln would have allowed, though there is no evidence that they disagreed on this point.) Eisenschiml, forgotten now, was an original, a German-born chemist turned amateur historian who helped invent the style and model of a certain kind of American paranoia: the by now familiar fussing over odd but irrelevant inconsistencies (Stanton seems to have had enough testimony to identify Booth shortly after midnight on

the night of the murder, but he didn't release his name until later that morning—because, of course, he wanted Booth to escape, etc.) and the same patterns of sinister coincidence; Oliver Stone claimed that the telephone lines went down in Washington after Kennedy's murder, and, sure enough, Eisenschiml believed that the telegraph lines were deliberately cut in Washington on the night of Lincoln's assassination.

Yet paranoid obsession can be a spur to close study, and Eisenschiml took the trouble to find out when "ages" might have entered the imagination. Once again, there is a wildly varying set of memories. Lucius E. Chittenden, who had worked for Lincoln in the government, claimed that what Stanton actually said was "There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen!," although he was not at Lincoln's bedside. One of Stanton's clerks, also not present, insisted that he said, "Ah, dear friend! there is none now to do me justice; none to tell the world of the anxious hours we have spent together!" But, in the twenty-five years that separated the scene and Hay's version of it, the record is cloudy. None of the newspaper reports in the days following the assassination, though all contain scenes from the deathbed, mention the words. (Eisenschiml imagines that Stanton's having

been reported as saying “angels” would have been a disaster—too self-consciously pious—and that he spread the “ages” story afterward. “Perhaps he told it to eager-eared hostesses,” Eisenschiml sneers.) Dr. Charles Sabin Taft, one of the attending doctors who had been in Ford’s Theatre, wrote in notes that he claimed to have made the following day (but did not publish until twenty-eight years later), “When it was announced that the great heart had ceased to beat, Mr. Stanton said in solemn tones, ‘He now belongs to the Ages.’” But Taft’s father also kept a diary (it is available online) and, in recounting the scene as his son described it to him, he makes mention of neither ages nor angels.

Hay put his stamp on the words as we usually hear them. That was adequate warrant for a century, and perhaps should be still. He was there; he had no plausible motive to lie and no reason to misremember. It is possible that there is an obscure source for the epitaph in the twenty-five years between the event and the biography, but the famous words seem remarkably fragile, insecurely sourced and late in arriving, like so many other moments in history that seem sure until they are inspected, and become more uncertain the longer they are sought.

There’s another rhetorical style that runs like the Mississippi right down the middle of the mid-nineteenth-century American mind, shaping phrases and supervising thoughts, flowing as strong as the classical, the Biblical, and the lawyerly, and that is the Shakespearean. Lincoln’s love of Shakespeare is familiar, but is usually treated as a delightful character trait, like his fondness for ice cream or the comedy of Artemus Ward. But Lincoln’s taste in Shakespeare was narrow, significant, and almost obsessive. He didn’t love “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and “As You Like It”; it was the histories and three of the tragedies that held him. In 1863, he repeatedly went to see “Henry IV” when James H. Hackett was playing Falstaff, with all the Falstaffian black comedy against conscription and the cult of honor. He took volumes of Shakespeare out of the Library of Congress; went to a Washington theatre to see the famous E. L. Davenport in “Hamlet”; attended private recitations of Shakespeare; sought out a production of “Othello”;

watched Edwin Booth, John Wilkes’s brother, in “Richard III,” and the greatest American Shakespearean, Edwin Forrest, in “King Lear,” at Ford’s. Just five days before the assassination, on April 9, 1865, steaming up the Potomac in the Presidential yacht, he spent “several hours” reading aloud from Shakespeare to those on board. Reciting from his favorite plays was a weakness of his; on August 22, 1863, Hay records in his diary that he fell asleep at the Soldiers’ Home while listening to Lincoln recite Shakespeare.

In a letter to Hackett, Lincoln admitted, “Some of Shakespeare’s plays I have never read; while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are ‘Lear,’ ‘Richard III,’ ‘Henry VIII,’ ‘Hamlet,’ and especially ‘Macbeth.’ I think nothing equals ‘Macbeth.’” These are all dramas of unexpected murder, of ambition turned into evil. Many writers have commented on how strange and naked it is that Lincoln, who, as his partner Herndon wrote, ran relentlessly on the “little engine” of his own ambition, should embrace a tragedy about ambition. He was plainly haunted by the imagery of fallen and ruined leaders, and sensed how fine a line separates a king and a usurper, or a Lincoln and a Davis.

But even stranger and more striking is Lincoln’s identification or, at the very least, fascination with the figure of Claudius. In that same letter to Hackett, Lincoln insisted that Claudius’s soliloquy beginning “O, my offense is rank” was superior to any of Hamlet’s, and we know that he committed it to memory, and would recite it at length even to acquaintances—an artist who had come to paint his portrait, for instance. Lincoln’s evaluation was as unorthodox then as it is now. And what is the burden of Claudius’s speech? It is about guilt and ambition, and about the fraternal blood-dealing that that produces. As Kenneth Tynan has pointed out, Claudius’s tragedy is that he is clearly the most able man in Denmark, but he has got his throne through blood and cannot be free of the taint. (No one,

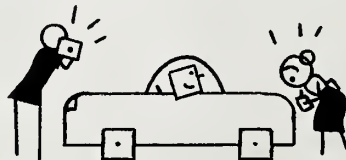
except Hamlet, criticizes his conduct as king.) His speech runs through to the difference between his conduct as seen on earth and in Heaven, and ends with an image of his soul as a “limed” bird, caught in a sticky trap, that gets more stuck as it struggles:

“Forgive me my foul murder”?
That cannot be; since I am still possess’d
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
May one be pardon’d and retain the offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft ’tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law; but ’tis not so above;
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature; and we ourselves compell’d,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence. What then? what rests?
Try what repentance can: what can it not?
Yet what can it when one can not repent?
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay!

There’s no reason to believe that Lincoln “identified” with Claudius, or thought his own conduct evil. But he shuddered to think what his ambition, together with his principles, had helped make happen. He recognized and understood the pain of one who, believing himself, as Claudius does, to be essentially good and capable of salvation, knows that he is covered with blood—one who, having chosen to take on the weight and worry of the world, knows that he has done it and, like Macbeth, too, cannot be free of its guilt: *Help, angels! Make assay!*

What makes Lincoln still seem noble, to use an old-fashioned word, is that he had not a guilty sense of remorse but a tragic sense of responsibility. He believed that what he was doing was right; he knew that what he was doing was dealing death to the undeserving (knowledge that must have been doubled at the Soldiers’ Home as the bodies were brought to be buried week after week). If Lincoln truly has something in common with Jesus, it is that he is the model of a charismatic ethical intelligence who was also a calm dealer of punishment on a vast scale: *Some to my right and some to my left . . .*

Lincoln exemplifies the problem of liberal violence: the disjunction between the purity of our motives (as they appear to the liberal) and the force of our violence (as it is experienced by the victim). The reality of his faith in his beloved rule of reason, and the constant presence of



his magnanimous and winning character, doesn't preclude his engagement in mass killing. *The corrupted currents of the world.* (That other autodidact Midwesterner Harry Truman also turned to "Hamlet" to find words to expiate his blood-guilt, underlining at the end of a book about the atomic bomb a long quote from the last act of "Hamlet" that begins, "Let me speak to the yet unknowing world/How these things came about: So shall you hear/Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts/Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,/Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause . . . And, in this upshot, purposes mistook/Fall'n on the inventors' heads.")

Lincoln's spiritual state by the end of the war was very much like that of a Shakespearean tragic hero: resigned to a deadly fate that he did not will but would not avoid. Shakespeare's continuing appeal to liberal societies, despite his feudal settings, lies in his ability to create characters who intend no harm and end up covered with blood. Shakespeare suits liberal violence, with its corrupted currents, admirable ambition, and casual slaughters—and what makes Lincoln and Truman admirable, if not heroic, is that they knew it.

I went at last to visit the Petersen House, the tiny old boarding house where Lincoln spent his last hours. I stood in a long line stretching out to the door, surrounded by other tourists, waiting to get to the room at the back where Lincoln died. Now, after months of reading, I was convinced that the first thought that would have crossed Stanton's mind was the angels. Given the man, and the association, what else but angels?—though perhaps they would be not so much the religious angels of an ascension as the Shakespearean angels of fate, the ones who wear us out, the angels whom Claudius prayed to and who sang to Hamlet at his end.

And then, later, someone—perhaps Stanton at the time, or perhaps only Hay long afterward—thought that there was more point and solemn originality in what someone else (Hay from the very moment, perhaps?) thought he had heard, and decided to change it. As the line shuffled forward, I made up my mind about what must have happened: Stanton had muttered "angels," been heard as

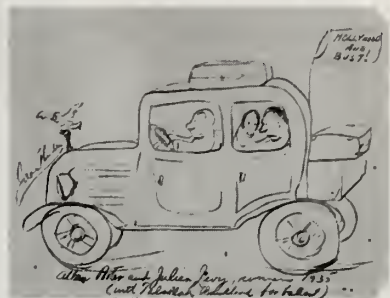
saying "ages," and, if he had been asked which afterward, would have been torn. He might have decided to enable the mishearing, in order to place Lincoln in history, not Heaven. It seemed possible that both versions were true, one to the intention and the other to the articulation, one to the emotion of the moment and one, in retrospect, to the meaning of the life. Angels or ages? Lincoln belongs to both.

The sentence forms in the mind, and with it the thought that there would be a good place to end: *he belongs to both.* But, as the queue inches forward and I can see, at last, into the room that I have been reading about . . . I want to laugh. This place isn't small; it's *tiny*. They brought him here, to this back room, I had learned, because all the other rooms in the house were too messy for a President to die in, and yet: *four* people would make it crowded; six would overwhelm it; the forty or so who passed in and out, and the ten or twenty who crowded inside at the end would have turned it into the stateroom scene in "A Night at the Opera."

In the brief moment given to each visitor to look inside, I wished for a machine that would be able to re-create every breath of air, every vibration that ever took place in a room. And then I knew that we probably would not have understood any better had we been standing there than we do now. Stanton was weeping, Lincoln had just died, the room was overwhelmed, whatever he said was broken by a sob—the sob, in a sense, is the story. History is not an agreed-on fiction but what gets made in a crowded room; what is said isn't what's heard, and what is heard isn't what gets repeated. Civilization is an agreement to keep people from shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theatre, but the moments we call historical occur when there is a fire in a crowded theatre; and then we all try to remember afterward when we heard it, and if we ever really smelled smoke, and who went first, and what they said. The indeterminacy is built into the emotion of the moment. The past is so often unknowable not because it is befogged now but because it was befogged then, too, back when it was still the present. If we had been there listening, we still might not have been able to determine exactly what Stanton said. All we know for sure is that everyone was weeping, and the room was full. ♦

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
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